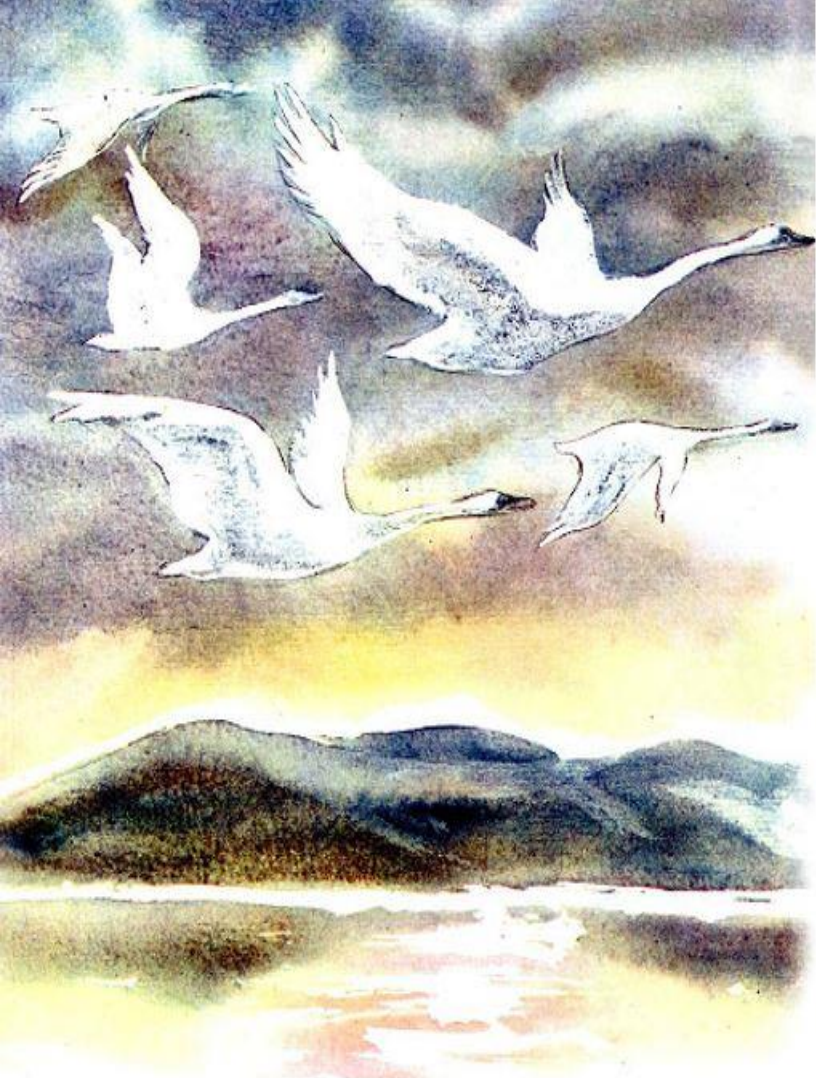




Dmitri Mamin-Sibiriak

Little Grey Neck

Translated by Kathleen Cook, Illustrated by N. Harash



The first cold spell of autumn, that turned the grass yellow, threw the birds into a state of great anxiety. They began to prepare for their long journey and had a grave, worried air. It is no easy matter to fly a distance of several thousand miles... How many poor birds would not have the strength to cover it, how many would perish from chance accidents on the way. There was indeed food for thought.



The big, serious birds, swans, geese and ducks, prepared for the journey with an important air, fully aware of difficulty of the forthcoming undertaking; but it was the little birds, the sandpipers, phalarope, dunlin and plover, who flapped and fussed and squawked most of all. They had gathered in flocks and were wheeling from bank to bank, over the shoals and marshes, as quickly as a handful of tossed peas. The little birds were so busy...

The forest stood dark and silent, for the main warblers had flown away without waiting for the cold.

"Why are those little brats in such a hurry!" grumbled the old Drake, who did not like to bestir himself. "We'll all fly away in good time... I don't see what all the fuss is about."

"You were always lazy, that's why you don't like seeing others busy," explained his wife, the old Duck.

"I was lazy? You're just being unfair to me, and that's that. Perhaps I worry more than anyone, only I don't show it. There's no use rushing round the bank from dawn to dusk, squawking, disturbing other folk, and upsetting everyone."

The Duck was not particularly pleased with her spouse in general, and now she got really angry.

"Just look at the others, you lazy thing! It's a pleasure to watch our neighbours, the geese or the swans. They live together so happily... I bet a swan or a goose would never leave its nest—and they are always at the head of the brood. Yes, they are... But you've no time for the children. You think only of yourself, of stuffing your belly. Lazy, that's the word for it... I'm sick of the sight of you."



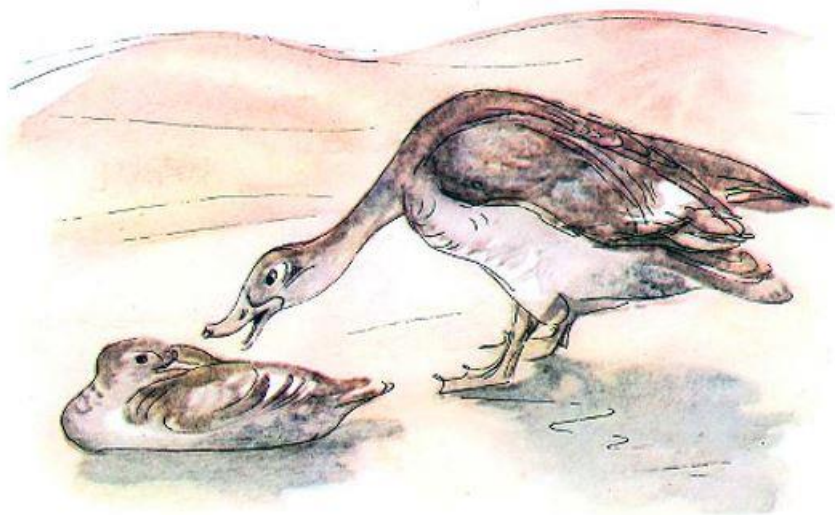
“Steady on, old girl! After all, I don’t talk about you having such an unpleasant character. Everyone’s got his faults... It’s not my fault that geese are stupid birds and that’s why they fuss over their brood. My rule is not to stick my nose in other folk’s business. Why should I? Live and let live.”

The Drake was fond of weighty arguments, and it somehow always turned out that he, the Drake, was right, clever and better than anyone else. The Duck had got used to this long ago, and now it was something else that was worrying her.

“What sort of a father are you?” she let fly at her husband. “Fathers look after their children, but you couldn’t care less!”

“Are you talking about Little Grey Neck? What can I do, if she can’t fly? It’s not my fault...”

Little Grey Neck was their crippled daughter, Whose wing had been broken in the spring when the Fox crept up to the brood and snatched a duckling. The old Duck had attacked the enemy bravely and rescued the duckling; but one of her wings got broken.



"It's terrible to think of leaving Little Grey Neck here alone," the Duck repeated, tearfully. "Everyone will fly away, and she will stay all on her own. Yes, all alone... We will fly off to the warm south, but she will stay here and freeze, poor creature... After all, she is our daughter, and I love her so much, my Little Grey Neck! You know what, old man, I'll stay here with her for the winter..."

"What about the other children?"

"They're healthy, they'll manage without me."

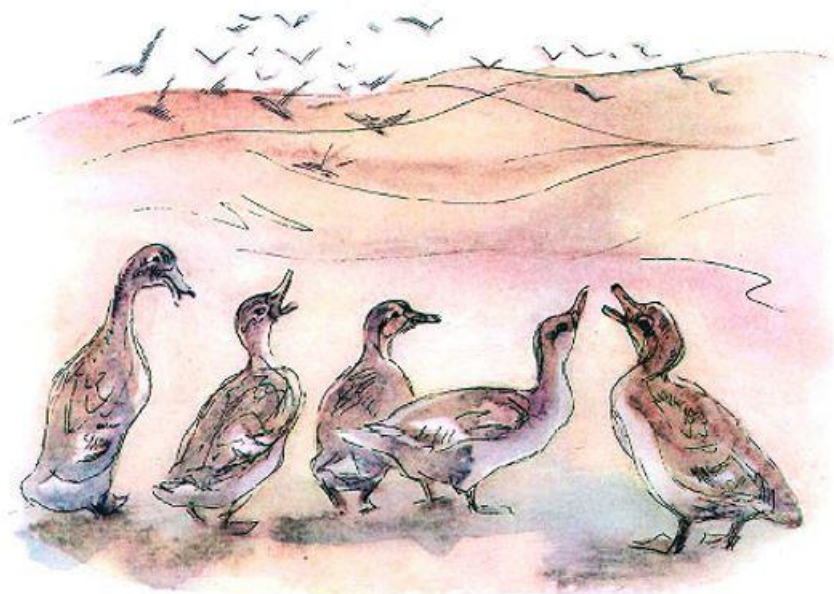
The Drake always tried to change the subject when the conversation turned to Little Grey Neck. He loved her, too, of course, but why so worked up about it? Of course it was a pity that she would stay here and freeze, but there was nothing they could do about it. And they had to think about the other children, too. His wife was forever worrying, but you had to look things straight in the eye. The Drake was secretly sorry for his wife, but did not quite understand her maternal grief. It would have been better if the Fox had eaten Little Grey Neck for she was bound to perish in the winter anyway.



In view of the approaching parting, the old Duck was twice as affectionate to her crippled daughter. Poor Little Grey Neck did not know the meaning of parting and loneliness, and watched the others prepare for the journey with the curiosity of a novice. True, she sometimes felt envious that her brothers and sisters were so gaily preparing to fly away, that they would be going far, far away, to where there was no winter.

"You will come back in the spring, won't you?" Little Grey Neck asked her mother.

"Yes, yes, dear, we'll come back... And we'll all live together again."



To comfort Little Grey Neck, who was beginning to grow pensive, her mother told her of similar cases when ducks had stayed for the winter. She was personally acquainted with two such couples.

"You'll manage somehow, dear," the old Duck reassured her. "At first you'll be a bit lonely, then you'll get used to it. I wish we could take you to the warm spring that does not freeze in winter,—that would be really good. It's not far from here... But what's the good of wishing, we can't take you there, and that's that!"

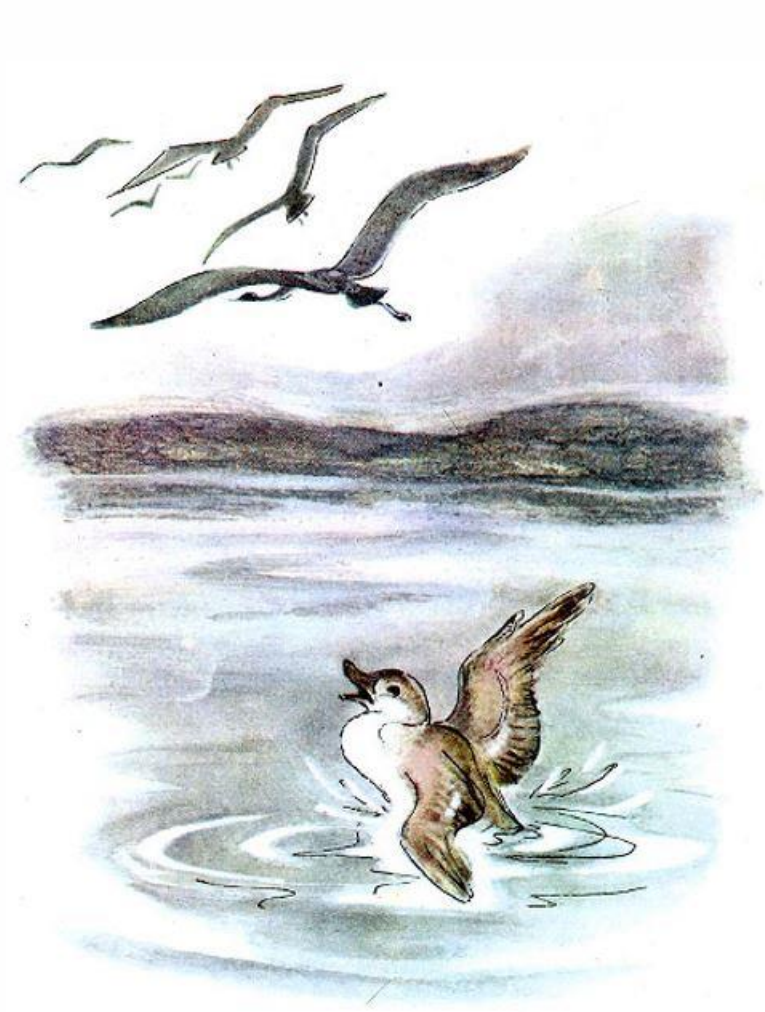
"I will think of you all the time..." repeated poor Little Grey Neck. "I'll keep wondering where you are, and what you are doing, and whether you are alright... It will be just the same as if I were with you."

It was all the old Duck could do to conceal her despair. She tried to look happy and wept secretly so no one saw. How sorry she was for poor, sweet Little Grey Neck!... She hardly noticed the other children now and paid no attention to them, she even thought she did not love them.

How quickly time flew! There had already been several morning frosts. The birches turned yellow from the cold and the aspens red. The water in the river grew darker, and the river itself looked larger because its banks were now bare,—its trees and bushes lost their leaves quickly. The cold autumn wind ripped off the dry leaves and carried them away. The sky was often covered with heavy clouds that brought light autumn rain. In general, it was not very pleasant, and flocks of migrating birds had been sweeping past for several days...

The first to take off were the marsh birds, because the marshes had already begun to freeze. The water-fowl remained longer than anyone else. Little Grey Neck was grieved most of all by the departure of the cranes, because they cried so plaintively, as if calling her to go with them. For the first time she had a pang of secret foreboding, and gazed for a long while at the flock of cranes winging across the sky.

“How nice it must be for them!” thought Little Grey Neck.



The swans, geese and ducks were also beginning to prepare for the flight. Individual nests joined together in large flocks. The old, experienced birds taught the young. Each morning the young birds would make practice flights, chirping merrily, to strengthen their wings for the long journey. The wise leaders taught them first in small groups, then all together. There was so much squawking, youthful high spirits and excitement...

Only Little Grey Neck could not take part in these flights and admired them from afar. There was nothing to do but reconcile herself to her fate. But how well she swam and dived! Water was her element.

"We must be setting off... it's high time!" the old leaders were saying. "What are we waiting for?"

Time flew, so quickly... And the fatal day arrived.

The whole flock gathered in a seething mass on the river. It was an early autumn morning, and the water was still covered with a dense mist. The flock of ducks numbered three hundred. You could hear nothing but the quacking of the leaders.



The old Duck had not slept all night—it was the last she would spend with Little Grey Neck.

“You stay over there by the bank where the spring runs into the river,” she advised her. “The water does not freeze there in winter.”

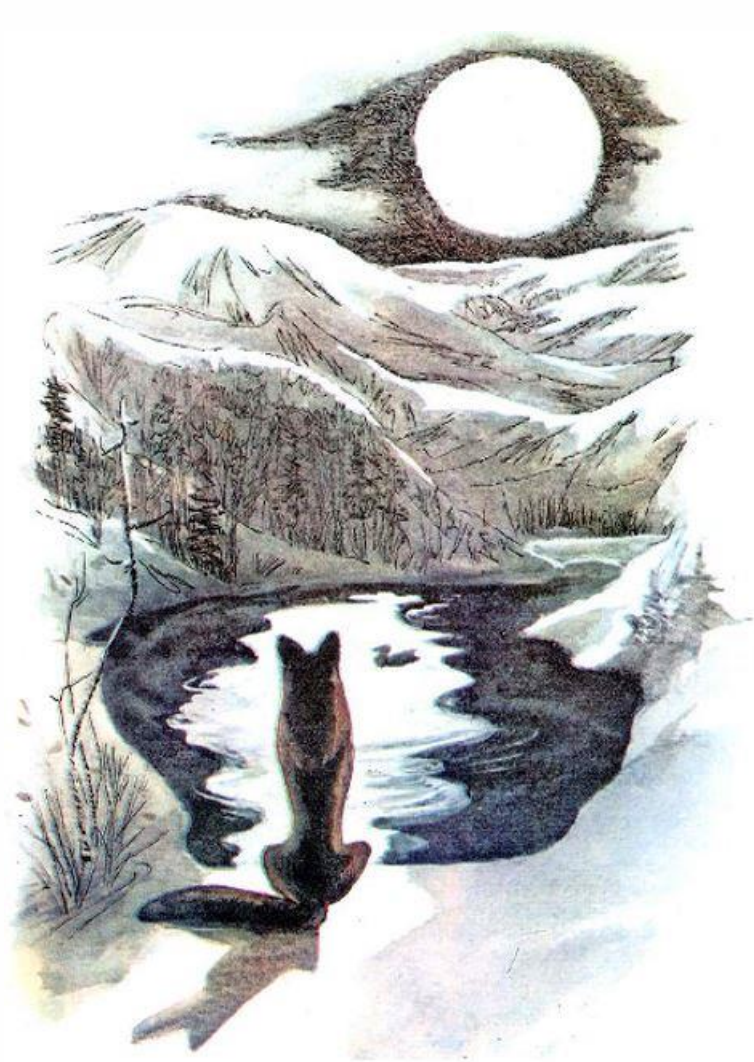
Little Grey Neck kept apart from the flock, like a stranger...

They were all so preoccupied with the departure that no one paid any attention to her. The old Duck’s heart ached for her poor Little Grey Neck. Several times she decided to stay; but how could she when there were the other children and she had to fly together with the flock?

“Off we go,” the main leader ordered loudly, and the flock rose up together.

Little Grey Neck was left alone on the river and watched the departing flock for a long time. At first they flew in a seething mass, but then they straightened out into a neat triangle and disappeared from view.

“Am I really all alone?” thought Little Grey Neck, bursting into tears. “It would have been better if the Fox had eaten me...”



The river where Little Grey Neck stayed flowed gaily in the mountains covered with dense forest. It was a deserted spot with no dwellings anywhere around. In the morning the water by the banks began to freeze, but in the afternoon the ice, thin as glass, melted.

"Surely the whole river won't freeze over?" thought Little Grey Neck in horror.

She was lonely on her own, and kept thinking about her departed brothers and sisters. Where were they now? Had they arrived safely? Did they still remember her? There was enough time now to think about everything. She learned the meaning of loneliness. The river was empty, and the only life was in the forest, where hazel-grouse whistled and squirrels and hares darted about.

Once Little Grey Neck was so lonely that she climbed into the forest and was very frightened when a Hare somersaulted out from behind a bush.

"Goodness, you did frighten me, you silly thing!" muttered the Hare, recovering his composure. "Made my hair stand on end... What are you doing here? The ducks flew away long ago."

"I can't fly: the Fox bit my wing when I was very little..."

"Oh, that Fox! She's the worst of the lot. Been after me for a long time... You watch out for her, specially when the river gets frozen over. She'll pounce on you..."

They made friends. The Hare was as defenseless as Little Grey Neck, and managed to stay alive by constant flight.

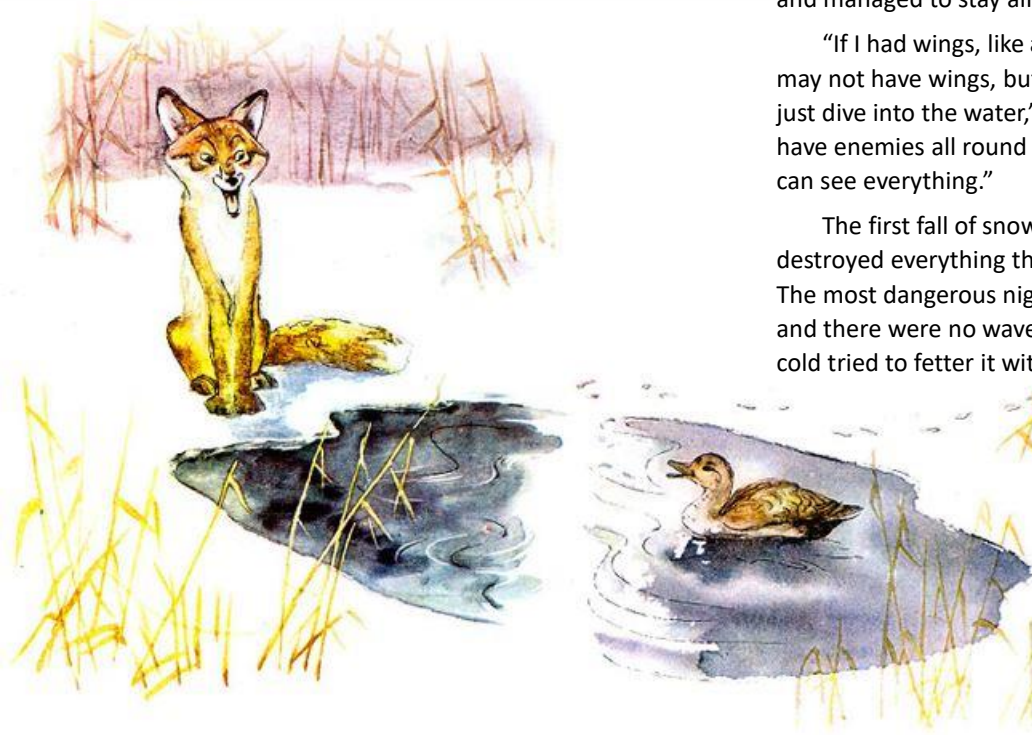
"If I had wings, like a bird, I don't think I'd be afraid of anyone! You may not have wings, but you can swim, and if anything happens you can just dive into the water," he said. "But I tremble with fear all the time. I have enemies all round me. In the summer I can hide, but in winter you can see everything."

The first fall of snow came soon, but the river still resisted the cold. It destroyed everything that froze in the night. It was a fight to the death. The most dangerous nights were the clear, starry ones, when all was still and there were no waves on the river. The river seemed to sleep, and the cold tried to fetter it with ice as it slept.

And this is just what happened. It was a starry night, as still as could be. The dark forest on the bank stood quietly, like giants on guard. The mountains looked higher, as they do at night. A high moon bathed all in its trembling, sparkling light. The mountain river that had seethed in the afternoon grew calm, and the cold crept quietly up, embraced the proud beauty tightly and seemed to cover her with glass.

Little Grey Neck was in despair, because only a small patch of water in the very middle of the river remained unfrozen. There was only about thirty meters where she could swim.

Little Grey Neck's distress knew no bounds when the Fox appeared on the bank, the very same Fox that had broken her wing.





“Ah, an old acquaintance, good-day to you!” said the Fox affectionately, stopping on the bank. “Haven’t seen you for a long time... Happy winter to you.”

“Go away, please, I don’t want to talk to you,” replied Little Grey Neck.

“So that’s what I get for being friendly! You’re a nice one, and no mistake! People say a lot of untrue things about me, you know. They get up to some mischief, then put the blame on me... Goodbye for now!”

When the Fox had gone, the Hare appeared and said:

“Watch out, Little Grey Neck: she will come again.”

And Little Grey Neck began to be afraid like the Hare. The poor thing could not admire the miracles that were happening around her. It was real winter now. The earth was covered with a snow-white carpet. Not a single dark patch remained. Even the bare birch trees, alder, willow and rowan were trimmed with a frost like silver down. The firs were even more impressive. They were covered with snow as if they had donned a warm fur coat.

Everywhere was exquisitely beautiful. But poor Little Grey Neck knew one thing only, that this beauty was not for her, and she trembled at the thought that the patch of water would freeze and she would have nowhere to go. The Fox really did come a few days later. She sat on the bank and began talking to Little Grey Neck again:

“I got lonely without you, little duck... Come out, or if you don’t want to, I will come to see you... I’m not proud...”



The Fox began to crawl cautiously over the ice towards the patch of water. Little Grey Neck's heart stopped beating. But the Fox could not get to the water, because the ice there was still very thin. She lay her head on her front paws, licked herself and said:

"How silly you are, little duck... Come out onto the ice! Oh, well, goodbye, then. I have other matters to attend to..."

The Fox began to come every day—to see whether the patch of water had frozen over. The cold frosts did their work. Now all that remained of the patch was a tiny window, about two meters wide. The ice was thick, and the Fox sat on the very edge. Poor Little Grey Neck dived into the water in terror, and the Fox sat there and laughed nastily:

"Dive if you like, but I'll eat you all the same... You'd do better to come out on your own."

The Hare watched the Fox from the bank, and his little hare's heart was as angry as could be.

"Oh, that horrid Fox! And poor Little Grey Neck! The Fox will eat her up."



In all probability the Fox would have eaten Little Grey Neck when the patch of water froze, but things turned out differently. The Hare saw it all with his own squinty eyes.

It was in the morning. The Hare jumped out of his hole to get some food and play with the other hares. It was very frosty, and the hares warmed themselves by clapping their paws. It was fun, in spite of the cold.

“Look out, everyone,” somebody shouted.

And danger was close at hand, indeed. On the edge of the forest stood a hunched old hunter, who had skied up silently and was deciding which of the hares to shoot.

“Ha, there’s a warm coat for my old woman!” he thought, choosing the largest hare.

He was already taking aim, when the hares noticed him and sped into the forest like mad things.



“Ee, the crafty lot,” thought the old man angrily. “I’ll get you... The silly things don’t understand that the old woman must have a fur coat. She can’t freeze, can she? You won’t get the better of Akintich, however fast you run. Akintich will be craftier than you... Akintich’s old woman told him, ‘Don’t you come back without a fur coat, old man!’ And you’re running off...”

The old man climbed down to follow the hares’ tracks, but the hares had spread over the forest like peas. The old man was surprised. He cursed the crafty hares and sat down on the river bank to rest.

“Oh dear, old woman, our coat’s run away!” he thought aloud. “Never mind, I’ll have a rest and look for another one.”

The old man sat there, ruefully, and then what should he see but the Fox creeping over the frozen river, like a cat.

“Well, I never, what a bit of luck!” said the old man, happily. “A collar for the old woman’s coat has crept up for the taking. Must be thirsty, or it wants to do some fishing.”

The Fox really had crept right up to the patch of water where Little Grey Neck was swimming, and lain down on the ice. The old man’s eyes were failing and he did not see the duck behind the Fox.

“I must shoot so as not to spoil the collar,” thought the old man, taking aim at the Fox. “The old woman will give me what-for if the collar’s full of holes... There’s a right way of doing everything, even killing a bedbug.”

The old man took aim for a long time, choosing a good spot on the collar-to-be. Finally the shot rang out. Through the smoke the hunter saw something flash on the ice, and rushed over to the patch of water. He tripped twice on the way, and when he got to the patch of water he stopped in dismay: there was no collar at all, only frightened Little Grey Neck swimming in the water.

“Well, I never!” the old man sighed, spreading out his arms in astonishment. “First time I’ve seen a fox turn into a duck... The crafty beggar!”

“The Fox ran away, Grandad,” Little Grey Neck explained.

“Ran away? That’s goodbye to your fur collar, old woman... What shall I do now, eh? What a nuisance... But why are you swimming here, you silly?”

“I couldn’t fly away with the others, Grandad. One of my wings is hurt...”

“Ee, you silly lass! You’ll freeze to death here or the Fox will eat you... Mmm...”

The old man thought and thought, then shook his head and decided:

“This is what we’ll do: I’ll take you to my grand-daughters. They will be pleased. And in the spring you will lay eggs for the old woman and hatch ducklings. Right? That’s what we’ll do, you silly...”

The old man took Little Grey Neck out of the patch of water and tucked her into his jacket.

“I won’t say anything to the old woman,” he thought, setting off home. “Let her fur coat and collar roam around a bit longer in the forest. The main thing is that our grand-daughters will be so pleased...”

The hares saw all this and smiled happily. Never mind, the old woman would not be cold on the stove, even without a fur coat.